

John Marsh House
Brentwood Vic., Contra Costa County
California

HABS No. CAL-1500

HABS
CAL
7-BRENT.V
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Design and Construction
450 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, California

HABS
CAL
7-BRENT. V
17

PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CAL-1500
Page 1

JOHN MARSH HOUSE

Brentwood Vic., Contra Costa County, California

ADDRESS: Located about four miles southwest of Brentwood
OWNER: Public Works Department, Contra Costa County
OCCUPANT: Vacant
USE: Proposed center of public park

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The John Marsh house is one of the major residential structures of mid-19th century Contra Costa County. Built by a pioneer physician between 1853 and 1856, its history has been ill-starred. Dr. Marsh (possessed of only a B.A., not an M.D.) was murdered soon after the completion of the house; his wife, Abby Tuck Marsh, died slightly earlier from the results of child-birth.

The house was designed by Thomas Boyd (Pierce and Wood contractors). It was constructed of native sandstone and brick made on the property. After Marsh's death, it passed to the daughter of John and Abby Marsh and to Marsh's illegitimate son. Once the center of a vast cattle empire, the house has gradually declined into a derelict state in the 20th century. Various proposals for its restoration and use have been made by the Park Department of Contra Costa County.

Stylistically a cross between a Victorian Gothic "cottage" and an Italian Villa, it now sits in lonely isolation amidst the valleys and hills northeast of Mount Diablo. The three storied house (with a lofty off-center tower on the facade) was never important for its interiors; but the Gothic and Italianate details of the exterior represent a unique fusion of those forms in this still untrammelled section of Contra Costa County.

CAL-1500
Page 2

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

John Marsh was born in Danvers, Massachusetts, on June 5, 1799. He received his B.A. from Harvard University in 1823. Possessed of a restless temperament, he moved west - first to Fort Snelling, Minnesota (where he began the study of medicine) and later to Prairie du Chien in what is now Wisconsin. There he fathered an illegitimate son, Charles. Becoming uncomfortably involved in Indian affairs between the Fox and Sioux, which he had helped foment, John Marsh went on to Missouri, where he stayed some years. In 1835 he travelled south to Santa Fe, and into old Mexico. By 1836, he had arrived at the Pueblo de Los Angeles. Upon presentation of his B.A. diploma to the ayuntamiento at Los Angeles, he received certification as a physician.

Searching for property where he might settle, Marsh came to Northern California and investigated several possibilities. Finally, he decided on a large rancho, which had been originally granted to Jose Noriega on October 13, 1835. In 1837 Marsh acquired the extensive property (estimated at one hundred and twenty square miles) known then as Los Medanos or Los Meganos, which lay between Mount Diablo and the San Joaquin River.¹ Marsh was apparently kind to the native Indians (even if he had bought property which was technically theirs), taking care of their sick and teaching them various new crafts. They in turn helped him to construct an adobe dwelling on the bank of a stream opposite their village. Grape cuttings and fruit trees were planted to enrich the land; and wheat was sowed over a wide area. The adobe consisted of four rooms and an attic; only one room had a fireplace. In front was a porch; benches on either side of the door provided sitting space on the long, hot summer evenings.

In an area where doctors were as scarce as white women, John Marsh was much in demand. His long and arduous trips overland to see patients or assist women in childbirth were paid in cattle. Something of an "operator", John Marsh insisted on a heavy return for his services - allegedly a steer for every mile he had to travel. In time, a great cattle empire grew up in the waving fields of wheat. A landing was established on the San Joaquin River above Pittsburg, known as Marsh Landing. Possessed of a clear intelligence and a witty style, John Marsh began writing letters back to Missouri where he had stayed some time - about the new land and its possibilities. His persuasive correspondence, published in Missouri newspapers, was influential in bringing new settlers west.

CAL-1500

Page 3

However, John Marsh greeted these new arrivals with the same shrewdness he had used on Indians and California Mexicans, exacting special fees for food and certain "legal" services which were in excess of value or local law. (The members of the Bidwell-Bartleson party of 1841 especially complained of his practices.)

In 1851, John Marsh met Miss Abby (or Abbie) Tuck, a recent arrival from the eastern United States. Born in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, Miss Tuck was a lively, attractive young woman - the daughter of a minister. After a whirlwind courtship, they were married on June 24, 1851. The couple went to live in the adobe on Rancho Los Meganos, with its dirt floors and lack of creature comforts. It was obvious that a new house was in order for the delicate Abby Tuck Marsh, who had come to California for her health. Marsh commissioned an imposing mansion (by local standards, at least) from Thomas Boyd of San Francisco.² It must be worthy of a cattle baron, also possessed of great stretches of wheat, orchards and vineyards, as well as numerous fine horses. The land, though rich, was possessed of a curiously splendid loneliness - with brown rounded hills, comparatively few "green" trees, and wide spreading, empty valleys.³

Abby gave birth to a daughter, named Alice Marsh, on March 12, 1852. Now a better house was even more imperative. Construction began in 1853. Abby Marsh died soon after. Marsh enjoyed his new home only a short time, too. In the spring of 1856, he had a dispute with some vaqueros about branding calves. On September 24 of that year, John Marsh drove to Martinez to superintend a major cattle sale. He was said to be carrying a large amount of gold on his return; was jumped by the vaqueros with whom he had quarreled earlier that year and that very day. California Registered Historic Landmark 722, a half-mile east of Martinez on the Pacheco Road, marks the spot where the men murdered him.⁴ Marsh and his wife were originally buried at the rancho, but their bodies have since been removed to Mountain Cemetery in Oakland. The great estate and the new house passed to his heirs.⁵ (A story tells of how, in the last months of his life Marsh received a poorly dressed young man asking for shelter and food. In the classic manner of fairytales, Charles, by a foot deformity he had from birth, was finally identified by Marsh as his illegitimate son.) Neither Charles or Alice Marsh (later Mrs. W. W. Camron) were able to take much from this vast property, and obligations mounted.

The land was sold, eventually, to Jack Williams backed by the Sanford family of New York. It was proposed that a coal vein be opened on the

CAL-1500

Page 4

property and a railroad be built to Marsh Landing. (A major rail line already crossed the property; it ultimately became part of the Santa Fe system - an ironic connection with March's own travels to Santa Fe, New Mexico.) The Brentwood Coal Company was formed, but the venture proved abortive. To settle outstanding taxes and other claims, the property was sold to the Clay Street Bank of San Francisco. M. B. Ivory became supervisor, and the rancho was turned into a tenant farm. Miss Josephine Sanford was a claimant of the land at the end of 19th century; she purchased it with a loan from Balfour, Guthrie and Company. At her death, the latter company managed the property as a farm. At some period, early in the 20th century, the Cal Foundation obtained the house and intended a restoration. Lacking funds, the Foundation deeded the house to Contra Costa County. The entire later history of the place was fraught with lawsuits and legal technicalities of a complex nature; the once proud house of a large estate is now a desolate wreck, surrounded by tenant farm buildings. Doors and windows are boarded; planting and other landscape details are neglected. The house awaits a meaningful restoration and proper setting.

Various bond issues have been attempted to provide funds for restoration and/or rebuilding of the old adobe, the former Indian Village and the Marsh house as the center of a five hundred acre park. Like many fund raising devices dependent on public support and special assessments, this one has not yet become a reality. As Stephen Lewis suggests (see note 5 here), perhaps the best solution is for some private individual to buy and restore the Marsh house and use the land for farming or cattle raising.

NOTES (Historical Information)

1. There were two ranches close to each other which had both borne the name of Los Medanos (the sand banks). Some writers attempted to distinguish between them by calling one (that owned by John Marsh) Los Meganos (sand dunes) and the other Los Medanos. cf. Hoover and Rensch. Historic Spots in California (one vol. ed.), Stanford University Press, 1948, p. 234. There is an important water color of the period, by Edward Jump, showing the Marsh house and Rancho Los Maganos, in the Honeyman Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

2. Comparatively little is known about the early career of Thomas Boyd, in the West. A Thomas Boyd became an important figure in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the later 19th century; he died in 1902. Withey

(Biographical Dictionary of American Architects: Deceased), pp. 69-70, enumerates his commissions; there are also notices in the American Architect and Building News (March 13 and September 11, 1880) about projects in Cambridge, Ohio and Grafton, West Virginia. Thomas Bruce Boyd (a son?) is noted in the 20th century.

3. Lyman, John Marsh, Pioneer, p. 295, says "Abby selected the site, It was ideal, in the portal of a pretty valley and almost directly opposite the old adobe. It commanded a fine sweep of the San Joaquin plain and was shaded by oaks."

4. Two of the men were apprehended, but one escaped; thus punishment was either impossible or long delayed. cf. Hulaniski, History of Contra Costa County, pp. 21-22, and Munro-Fraser, History of Contra Costa County, pp. 342-344, with a complete account of the murder.

5. Brewer, Up and Down California 1860-1864, pp. 269-272, describes the history of Marsh and the house with particular contemporaneity; he is scathing in his impressions of the manner in which Charles Marsh lived, turning the residence into a pig-pen. However, it is very likely that the house was never properly finished interiorly; and certainly its present appearance would not lead one to assume it was elegant - even by provincial Victorian standards.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS AND SOURCES

Bancroft, Hubert Howe. History of California, VI, pp. 10-11.

Brewer, William H. (Francis P. Farquhar ed.) Up and Down California in 1860-1864, New Haven, Yale U.P., 1931, pp. 269-272.

Hoover and Rensch. Historic Spots in California (one vol. ed.: revised), Stanford University Press, 1948, pp. 234-235.

Hulaniski, F. J. The History of Contra Costa County, California, Berkeley, The Elms Publishing Co., 1917, pp. 19-26; 133-135.

Kirker, Harold. California's Architectural Frontier, San Marino, Huntington Library, 1960, p. 67.

Lewis, Oscar. Here Lived the Californians, New York, Rinehart and Company, 1957, pp. 67-70.

Lewis, Stephen D. "John Marsh's Stone House." Paper submitted to Art 188B, University of California, Davis, January 8, 1962.
(I acknowledge my particular debt to Stephen Lewis for his thorough investigation of the later history of the house and present proposals for its use.)

Lyman, George D. John Marsh, Pioneer, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934.

McClure, James D. California Landmarks, Stanford University Press, 1959, pp. 53-54 (illus., p. 52), p. 140.

Munro-Fraser, J. P. History of Contra Costa County, California, San Francisco, W. A. Slocum & Co., 1882, pp. 304-306, 342-344, 605-617.

Parsons, Marion Randall. Old California Houses, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, pp. 51-57.

San Francisco Evening Bulletin, "California Home", July 19, 1856.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The most eloquent contemporary description of the Marsh house occurs in the San Francisco Evening Bulletin for July 19, 1856. Selected extracts from that account will aid in creating a more adequate architectural image of the house. "In the rear of the old adobe, flows peacefully, a broad brook . . . Across the valley, in the rear of the new house, stretches a noble grove of oaks . . . Between the grove and the house is a vineyard . . . In the rear of the adobe is another extensive vineyard. . . The stock at present upon the place is six thousand . . . The new and beautiful edifice now nearly completed is situated in the center of the plain. It is the intention of the proprietor to irrigate this plain by artificial means, using the water of the brook . . . By this process the whole plain in front of the house may enameled with flowers, or in process of time may be dotted with trees . . . From a quarry which has been opened on the estate an abundant supply of stone for the building has been obtained. It is of the finest quality of free-stone, of a beautiful drab or cream-color, slightly variegated. The building is quite an architectural gem. The architect, Thomas Boyd, Esq. (of San Francisco) with true artistic perception of the beauty of the site, and of what was wanted in the building to make it harmonize with the surrounding scenery, has departed

HAKS
CAL.
7-BRENTY
1-

CAL-1500

Page 7

from the stereotyped square box with a piazza running partly or entirely around it, called a home in California, and has adopted the old English domestic style of Architecture, - a pleasing and appropriate union of Manor House and Castle. The arched windows, the peaked roof and gables, the projecting eaves, the central tower sixty-five feet in height, boldly springing from the midst and enabling the proprietor to overlook his extensive domain, must be acknowledged by every visitor to be a most felicitous deviation from the prevailing style of rural architecture. The material used is as easily wrought as the Benicia stone in use here (that is, in San Francisco), and, like it, hardens by exposure to the air. The corners of the building as well as the door and window jams, sills and caps, are elaborately wrought, the space between the openings being laid with rubble-stone, giving a pleasing variety to the whole exterior. The building has a ground base of sixty by forty feet, and is three stories in height, with three gable windows in the attic looking east, west and south. On three sides of the building is a piazza, ten feet in width, supported by beautiful octagon pillars; over this is a walk on a level with the second floor, enclosed by an elaborately finished ballustrade (sic). The work has been performed in a skillful and satisfactory manner by Messrs, Pierce and Wood, the contractors for it. The interior arrangements are as carefully planned as possible to subserve the purpose of convenience, comfort and beautiful finish. The whole cost of the building, it is understood, will not exceed \$20,000.00." ¹

EXTERIOR - INTERIOR

The building was constructed with an approximately twelve inch stone shell (from material quarried on the property - the quarry is still to be seen today), and brick (burned on the property), and with a brick and wood interior. The chimneys were of brick. Cut sand-stone blocks (again as noted in the Evening Bulletin) were used for over-window moldings, for sills, front and rear entrances, and corner blocks or quoins (which are slightly rusticated). Window and door frames were of wood (now painted white in reveals), as are window mullions and muntins (now painted brown). The approximate floor space was as follows: 2100 square feet for each of three floors above ground, 720 square feet for the basement and 144 square feet for the tower.

The principal cross partitions of the interior are of masonry; other partitions are of wood studding, with wood lath fastened by means of square nails. All of the interior walls are finished, above any wood

dadoes, with smooth plaster. Ceilings also are of wood lath and plaster. The roof is framed in wood with deep wood cornices (painted white), the exterior roof surface is now covered with asphalt shingles, rather than the original wood shingles. The tower, planned to be entirely of stone, was rebuilt (probably after the earthquake of 1868) with a wooden top imitating the former castellated stone top; exterior sheathing below the battlements was of scored boards, imitating stone. About 1900 (estimated date) the battlements were removed from the wooden tower top and the vertical surfaces were shingled. Later, ca. 1925, the shingles were painted. A wood piazza or veranda, which encompassed the front, rear and left side only, had octagonal pillars with simple capitals "supporting" decorative flattened, pointed arches surmounted by a handsome balustrade with large turned balusters and finials above each octagonal pillar below, and simpler balusters between the turned balusters forming a balcony. At some indeterminate date (estimated about 1900), all of this wood veranda and balcony was reqorked. Square pillars replaced the octagonal ones, with all decorative "supporting" arches removed; large squared balusters surmounted by simple ball finials, replaced the turned ones in the balcony. (It would appear, from photographic evidence that the smaller balusters of the balcony were either reused or made anew in their original form.)

The main stylistic features of the exterior are the door and window openings. On the first and second floors, the openings (generally conceived as "French doors" on the veranda sides) have rounded or flattened arched headings suggestive of the hood molds of the Victorian Gothic but here so shallow of depth and with so prominent a keystone that they reflect Mannerist Italian sources. Clearly pointed or lanced windows appear in the three front gables, at the top of the tower, and at the third level of the house's sides. The front entrance is framed by triple arches, with the highest and widest in the center - vaguely reminiscent of the Palladian motif. At the rear, the triple-arched portal is even more aggressive, projecting out more deeply than the front portal. The cut stone details of both doors and windows suggest Italianate influence and the approach of Eastlake enthusiasms for chamfered edges. At the roof line, chimney tops have been modified at least once, as the four (now three) individual stacks of the chimney next to the tower do not appear in photographs of about 1870, but do in photographs of 1900 and later.²

Interiorly, the house indicates the shift from a symmetric late Georgian plan (still evident in many California houses of the late 1850's) to an asymmetric Victorian plan. The main hall, running from

front to rear doors, is off-center to the left, as is the tower over the front entrance. One is progressing here from the early form of the Italian Villa to the later, irregular type; indeed, the Marsh house is an unusually early example of the irregular type for California and reveals Boyd's more sophisticated connections with the eastern United States. To the left of the main hall is a large room occupying the entire depth of the house from front to back, although "divided" by a large arch on consoles into essentially two parlors. The dining room is to the right of the hall, with a study beyond at the far right side of the house. Behind the study is a kitchen, connected to the main hall by a stairhall at the back of the house. The second floor has essentially the same plan, with library and master bedroom over the parlor, and three bedrooms and a bath over the dining room, study and kitchen. The third floor probably had three rooms under the eaves, and a repeat of the main halls and top of the stair hall from the lower floors, as well as the tower chamber from which Marsh could watch for cattle thieves. The original arrangement of fireplaces has been modified. The chimneys suggest two in the parlor and one in the rooms above on the second floor; the single rough stone fireplace in the parlor now is not typically Victorian. Electricity and improved plumbing were added at some time around 1900.

The present condition of the house is deplorable. Erosion has weakened and abraded the entrance portal and other sandstone details at front and rear of the building. Both brick and stone have seriously eroded at or near grade level. A protective band of concrete now encircles the building, to about a height of twelve inches from grade level. All of the wooden veranda and balcony have been removed.

Most of the rooms are in shambles. Plaster has fallen from walls and ceilings on the first floor, exposing the interior construction. Natural finished hardwood wainscoting, about six feet high, still remains in the study, as does the similar (soft wood, painted) wainscoting in the kitchen. The banister and balustrade of the main staircase are relatively well preserved, although the soft wood steps have deteriorated more seriously. The interior finish of second story appears to be more recent than that of the first, and probably dates from the updating of the lighting, plumbing and heating in the 20th century. (Some of the electric light ceiling fixtures remain on both first and second floor.) The woodwork and doors of the second floor are obviously more recent than those of the first, and like the woodwork and doors of the third floor are painted gray, as is the kitchen on the first floor. (Most of the woodwork on the first floor is stained and varnished.) Pigeons have usurped the third floor and their

particular domain is the tower; however, the basic structure of floors and walls is remarkably good.

At the right rear of the house, adjacent to the kitchen, is a wood structure dating from the later 19th century; and contiguous to it, or at some remove in the rear of the Marsh house are a variety of wooden shacks and stables, or storage buildings, largely of the same era or the early 20th century. As late as about 1900, the original front planting and yard design of the stone house still remained - consisting of a large "circular" drive and an extensively planted area. Sometime between 1900 and about 1925, a two foot wall of field stone, with an opening in the center, was placed about thirty feet before the house. Some rather formal trees (such as cypress) were planted directly before the veranda. Thus it is difficult to obtain a clear frontal view of the Marsh house today. Concrete porch floors and walks were added at the front, rear and left side of the house.

NOTES (Architectural Information)

1. It is said that thirty "mechanics" erected the building.
2. The most revealing indication of changes to the exterior of the house, and a source which has guided much of this section, is a group of four photographs from HABS No. CAL-1500.

Prepared by,

Joseph A. Baird Jr.

Joseph A. Baird, Jr., PHD
University of California

January 1966

APPROVED:

Charles S. Pope
Charles S. Pope, AIA
Supervising Architect, Historic Structures
Western Office, Design and Construction
National Park Service

DATE:

January 1966